

Transcription: Tom Holland

Today is Monday, July 30th, 2012. My name is James Crabtree and this morning I'm interviewing Mr. Tom Holland. We are conducting this interview at the Lockhart Municipal Airport, and it is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you very much for taking the time let me come out and talk to you.

Tom Holland: I don't have much of a story, but I'll tell you what you want to know.

Mr. Fulton over here has told me a little bit, and I think it sounds like a great story.

Tom Holland: He gets that thing all pumped up.

Well sir, I don't know if he told you, but what we do is we're part of the state of Texas General Land Office, and we have archives at the Land Office that go back to the 1600s and 1700s. We have Stephen F. Austin's original Registro, and we have the land grant that David Crockett's widow received when he was killed at The Alamo, and we also have the Veterans Land Board which does a lot of the veterans programs here in Texas. So what we're doing is we're thanking veterans for their service, number one, but secondly we're saving these stories for posterity for future generations. So our goal in doing these interviews is that 200 or 300 years from now, people can listen to these interviews or read the transcripts and maybe learn something from them just like we learn today from all the archives that we have. The first question sir that I always like to start off with is just tell us a little bit about your childhood and your life before you went into the military.

Tom Holland: I'll go over all that now and I should've brought it with me, but -

Are you from Texas?

Tom Holland: I'm from Texas. I've been in Lockhart nearly all my life. I was born here. I graduated high school here in 1941. I went in the service in 1942, November 1942, and stayed until the war was over.

When Pearl Harbor was bombed in 1941, you were still in high school, but did you know at that point -

Tom Holland: I was just out of high school. When Pearl Harbor was bombed, I was working for a contractor on a air base, and we didn't know we were going to have a war, but we were prepared. Anyway we worked on the air base for the contractor that was working on concrete ramps and structures.

So at some point did you think in your mind you were going to enter the armed forces?

Tom Holland: If they wanted me. I told people I wasn't drafted, I was selected.

And you were selected into the Army Air Corps, is that right?

Tom Holland: Yeah.

Where did they send you to first?

Tom Holland: Well, I went to Kiesler Field, Mississippi, to basic training. They thought I had a disability. As a child, I had that arm burned when I was about three or four years old. So they put me on limited service, and they put me in, I guess to make me feel good they assigned me to the aviation cadet examining board as a flunkie. All I did was go to the headquarters every day and pick up the mail, come back and sweep the floors. That didn't set very well with me. One day they called us limited service people, and then they gave me another physical and said, my arm, my scars on the side, you don't need to be on limited service. I think they were getting ready to send me to the infantry. I said well, and I didn't like the job anyway, and right at Christmas time, and the captain that run the place, and the sergeant, he was gone and me and another flunkie were there, Christmas Day, and I decided I didn't want that job so I made an application to go to gunnery school, and I got orders while all of them were gone, so I just packed up and left. Fast forward through gunnery school, we were getting ready to, after gunnery school we were going to get on a crew and win the war and get it over with. But they decided we needed another classification, so they sent us to mechanic school back to Kiesler Field. I thought it was a hell hole and had to go to mechanic school. Of course going to gunnery school, they gave us three stripes right away. I went back to visit these jokers at the board, and the captain said Holland, how did you get your leave at this job? I said well, I came up on a shipping list and I had to go or I would've been AWOL. He said OK.

So at this point then you were a trained gunner and then a trained mechanic. That's kind of unusual, wasn't it?

Tom Holland: Well that was what they decided. We got through gunnery school just in time to get three stripes. After that, they didn't give a guy three stripes. I don't know what they gave 'em. Maybe PFC. But anyway we had three stripes, and I kept that all until I was discharged. I was getting paid all the time.

Were you married at this point?

Tom Holland: No, I wasn't married until I got home in 1946.

Did you have any siblings who were in the service?

Tom Holland: No.

So it was just you, and you were in Mississippi.

Tom Holland: Well, back up a little bit, my mother and dad broke up when I was about 7 or 8 years old, or 9 years old. I was raised with another family, and my sister.

Here in Lockhart?

Tom Holland: Yeah, and this family I was raised with, one boy my age, he was in the service, and he was a pilot. He never did leave the states, but he was in transports, and the rest of 'em were girls. I had one sister. This family I was raised with didn't, they didn't have but five kids and that wasn't enough, so they took me and my sister in, and I stayed with them until I

graduated high school. But this boy that was my age was Bob Snyder, and he stayed in the Reserve, and I guess he passed away a couple of years ago.

So they were in touch with you though when you were going through all your training.

Tom Holland: Oh yeah. That was my, my permanent address, it was on my dogtags.

Yes sir. So you'd gone through all your training, you were a trained mechanic, you were a trained gunner, and when did they finally send you overseas?

Tom Holland: I was I guess you'd say stalled out, applied to go to pilot school and I took the test and everything and went to college in Alabama for a short course, and went to San Antonio, and I think they decided I was a gunner, and they needed gunners, so they sent me on back to be a gunner. By that time, let's see, we were shipped to Florida and got on a crew. That was in Tampa. We found our crew there.

In Florida, that was kind of the big hub point wasn't it, for a lot of the bomber crews to come together?

Tom Holland: Training for the crew training on B-17's.

Tell us about what that was like finally getting to meet the other men that were going to be on your crew.

Tom Holland: Of course I was just a gunner, a tail gunner, and the crew consisted of pilot, copilot, bombardier and navigator. They were all officers. We had a radio operator who was enlisted, the ball turret gunner, two waist gunners and I was a tail gunner. We just flew more, gunners more or less, just rode around. We didn't do much gunning, but we got to do a little shooting. On the ground we would shoot skeet and they had different training, on shotguns. I had a shotgun mounted on my machine gun frame, and they'd shoot a clay pigeon up.

Try to keep your skills sharp, I would guess.

Tom Holland: And that was from February, March, April, May, and after we got through with our crew training, they gave us a little leave to come home, say goodbye, and went back to Savannah, Georgia, at Hunter Field. There we were assigned a brand new airplane. We were all set to go into combat in a new airplane. We flew this thing from Savannah up to New Jersey, and then up to Labrador and Greenland, and from Greenland to England. We landed and the guy said take all your stuff out to descent your airplane, and they put in a replacement pool and they put us in a replacement pool, and we were assigned to a group after that.

What were your thoughts and feelings at that point knowing you were finally going off to war after all the training you'd been through?

Tom Holland: Get it over with. Nothing going to happen to us. That's what everybody thought. Of course it happened from then on.

Tell us a little bit, sir, about the members of your crew, a little about their personalities, where they were from.

Tom Holland: Well, the officers, they were all separate, and the radio operator, him and the navigator and the pilots, they did all the work. The radio operator, he was on that radio all the time. He had to go by the codes of the day and his name was Walter DeGoodis. Then the ball turret gunner, he had been, he was older, I don't know how old he was. I was 22, yeah. And he'd been in the service for a while and he knew the ropes a little better. He was a staff sergeant. But we'd go to the mess hall and he'd get a little more pay, he'd been there, and he'd eat at the PX. Anyway, I didn't know much about him, and then the two waist gunners, they were I think both from California. One was named Floyd Broman and the other one was Edmund Thornton. One day I was looking at the Internet and I'd posted some stuff on different bulletin boards, and this girl called me. Well, it was Floyd Broman, so I clicked on it, and I contacted this gal, and she came back with me with an email and she said she didn't, this was her uncle, and she didn't have a picture, and knew about what he was, and I had a crew picture so I emailed it back to her.

I bet she appreciated that.

Tom Holland: And I didn't hear anymore. I think she was on a company computer or something. Fast forward to this month or so ago, I got a missing air crew report from I guess maybe her brother or something, another one of the kids, and it give me some information which I already had. And let's see, and I was in the tail

Do you think it was a pretty close knit crew? Because you were living and working together with these men.

Tom Holland: Well, all the enlisted men, they just lived together. Of course the officers, they were separated. I mean they were, maybe had different lives. After we finished our crew training and got our leave, well the pilot had a party at his house, just kind of a good will deal, and we played poker and drank beer, and then we went on our 10-day leave and then came back and went back in the business.

You mentioned you were 22. Were the pilots pretty much your age as well?

Tom Holland: The pilot, I think he and this ball turret gunner were the oldest. I'm thinking maybe he was 28. I never talked to him about it, but I think he must've been an airline pilot before he got in the service. When we got hit, he kind of remarked that if we just had an engine knocked off, he said he could control the thing, but the thing exploded before he could do anything.

So tell us sir, you get to England with your crew, how long is it before they have you fly an actual mission?

Tom Holland: We were in Greenland on June the 6th, D-Day.

OK, '44.

Tom Holland: Yeah. And we were grounded because of wind. OK, D-Day come along and they woke us up and said this is D-Day, you guys are going, wind or no wind. So we left.

Out of Greenland.

Tom Holland: Out of Greenland, right. We flew, and that was a long flight, and we didn't have to stop for gas, no place to stop, and then we landed at Valley Wales. That's where we lost our new airplane and they put us on a train and shipped us to a group.

Were you at an air base then?

Tom Holland: Yeah, it was Brattleston, England, was the 447th bomb group. The time we got there right after D-Day, we got a little orientation. We flew an orientation mission and we flew, I don't know what the date was, I have it in the records, but we flew our first mission, and there was two missions that day. We were the second one and it was late in the day, and we flew, and we flew all over France and they couldn't find a place to bomb, so we brought the bomb back. A few days later we flew the second mission, and it was over France. We dropped some bombs on an air field. But the most memorable mission we flew, we didn't drop bombs, we had canisters with supplies to the French. We didn't see any opposition that day at all. We dropped, our bombing altitude was about less than 1,000 feet.

Pretty low I guess.

Tom Holland: Yeah. Because they told us at briefing what the bombing altitude would be, and everybody was what? And they just said we're not gonna tell you what you're hauling. You have to wait and go out in the airplane and look. It was canister parachutes, and we dropped our supplies. There was three flights. We were on the low, one up here, another one up here. And we dropped our parachutes. They were right on the field. The next one was up here, and they drifted out to the edge of the woods. The third one was in the woods. The story was after we left, said the Germans came in and strafed these guys. But we didn't see any fighters. I never fired them guns in anger at all. But anyway, on the way back, I don't know, we climbed up to maybe 10,000 feet, pretty low, and you could see the coastline out there. It looks like we'd never get there at the altitude. All of a sudden, boom-boom-boom, I counted six bursts of flack right in among us. They didn't hit anybody, but they did a few holes in the airplane.

What was that like, sir, the first time you encountered flack like that? I'm sure they talked to you about it.

Tom Holland: We encountered flack every time.

Yes sir, but what was it like the first time? Anytime you go through training, I'm sure they tell you about it, but what's it like the first time you experience it?

Tom Holland: We were so inexperienced and young and dumb, we didn't even know enough to be scared.

Really.

Tom Holland: I don't know. They told us about flack, if you could see it out there, don't worry about it. If you could hear it, it's pretty close. That was the third mission. The fourth mission, we just made four – or three and a half, we were over a synthetic oil plant in Bohlen, Germany, and flack was pretty heavy. We didn't worry about it. We were so inexperienced we didn't know enough to even be scared at that point, and we got hit. I think it was the ball turret gunner announced that he was hit. The pilot said get him out of there. The ball turret you had to turn the gun straight down to open the door so he could get out. And in about the same breath, he

said we got fire, and he said get the fire extinguishers. And he indicated that he could control the plane at that point. Next thing, just bail the hell out of here. And I've got a picture out there I'll show you of the airplane going down.

So somebody else snapped a photo from another plane.

Tom Holland: I don't know, each bomber had a camera in the belly and they were taking pictures of the bomb damage when a bomb dropped. Well, they called us because we were going down and you could see bombs coming out of these other airplanes. Bombs away where we got hit. And when he said bail the hell out of here, I got out.

When you flew, did you already have a parachute strapped on you?

Tom Holland: Most of the crew except the pilot and copilot, they wore a backpack. The rest of us had a chest pack. It just snapped. We wore the harness and the parachute was separate. Anyway, we got hit and I must've got out just as that thing exploded. Then fast forward until I hit the ground and the Germans picked me up. I was sitting there. The only hurt I got, the buckle right here hit me on the chin.

Coming from the parachute.

Tom Holland: Otherwise I didn't get injured at all.

Had you had any parachute training prior to that?

Tom Holland: We knew what they looked like.

That's about it then, right?

Tom Holland: And then, I'll show you the picture after a while, the bombardier was in the nose. There was, if you've ever been in a B-17 -

Not been in one, but I've seen 'em up close.

Tom Holland: Well anyway, coming out of the nose is a door right under the pilot's, and it's an escape hatch, and the bombardier is the only other guy that survived. He was kind of beat up, but he just told me that he was by the door, and the navigator was next to him and the flight engineer was next to him. The navigator is supposed to pull the release. The bombardier said pull that damn release. He looked and he had it in his hand. So cable, what it does, it pulled the pins out of the hinge and you could open the door. He said it was pulled, so he reached down to re-pull it. About that time, these other guys fell against him and next thing he knew, he was there in the wide open spaces. His parachute harness was stitched down, you know, it breaks away when you pull the cord, and the parachute's out here, so he pulled it in and pulled the cord. The description of the witnesses from the other planes said one parachute was seen, but two others delayed their jump. I always thought it was my parachute. But it couldn't have been because these guys that delayed, they were knocked out I guess. They were just falling, and they saw the bombardier's parachute. I was in the back. They thought I didn't survive.

How did you get out of the airplane?

Tom Holland: Under the tail, there's an escape hatch right under the tail. So I just got the hell out. You had all that stuff on, flight vest and oxygen, your heated seats, lines, communication and all that. I just pulled the helmet off, got rid of all that, oxygen mask and everything and got out.

What altitude did you think you were when you bailed out?

Tom Holland: Well, the record showed we were 23,000 feet.

Wow. And when did you pull your, did you have any idea when you might've pulled your chute?

Tom Holland: As soon as I got out.

So you had a long time then to drift.

Tom Holland: Oh yeah.

What were your thoughts then, sir, at that point?

Tom Holland: A parachute like they got today, I could come home.

What were you thinking though at that point?

Tom Holland: I said well, I know I'm OK, folks back home don't know that. One thought was I wondered if my insurance policy was still good.

Really, you actually thought that while you were descending, huh. What happened when you hit the ground?

Tom Holland: Well, it was a bunch of civilians out there to greet me. One old guy cutting grain with a scythe, he was shaking that son of a bitch at me.

So he was angry at you.

Tom Holland: Yeah, I don't know what he was saying, but it wasn't pleasant.

It was in German?

Tom Holland: Then there was a big crowd coming from over my left, and I was going to gather up the parachute, stick it under this haystack. By that time, I heard a shot, and it was one German service guy named Hart Tishman, and I'll tell you that story, too.

Yes sir.

Tom Holland: Anyway, he searched me, and they issued us a sidearm, and I never did, I rolled it up and put it by my parachute in the plane, but then you go to high altitude, gets cold and come down it's warm, the damn thing sweats and you got to clean it after this. I was going to start carrying it and keep it warm. But I didn't even have the holster on. He searched me and the only thing I had was a Mounds candy bar. So he took it out and looked at it and put it back.

Did he speak any English?

Tom Holland: No, he didn't. I tried to get a drink of water and they couldn't understand drink or water. In German, it's wasser. Sounds to me like water.

That's right.

Tom Holland: Anyway, I sat around there, and they told me, don't, well there wasn't anybody to talk to. I don't know if it was an hour later or 30 minutes later, two hours I think it was, this car pulled up out there and the bombardier gets out. He was all beat up, and jaw, he was limping, I think he had some broken ribs. He was blown out. That thing just come apart right there where they were, they fell out. They were eating, and I said hunger, and they brought me something to eat. I forget what it was. They asked trink – I told them I wanted a drink of water. They didn't know what the hell water was. Finally said beer? I said OK. So they brought me a big old thing of beer. It tasted pretty good.

This was the summertime of '44? This was in 1944 summertime?

Tom Holland: June.

So not too long after D-Day then.

Tom Holland: Like I said, we landed right after D-Day, and I was shot down on the 29th of the same month.

So this was June 29th. What time of day was it you were shot down?

Tom Holland: I take it to be about, I think it was about 10 o'clock.

10 a.m.

Tom Holland: In the morning. It was a nice day.

So at that point, you knew you were captured. What were your thoughts?

Tom Holland: At that point, you don't know. We'll fast forward to late in the day, they picked us up and took us to I think it was an air base, and they put us in some kind of jail. It was a dreary looking place. Each one they put in a room. We didn't have I think anything else to eat. The next morning they woke us up, put us in a truck and they handed a guy a loaf of bread and that loaf of bread was supposed to be for so many guys. Nobody took it, and one of the guys said we better take it, that's all you're gonna get. They shipped us several places, to collection points.

Was there ever at any point sir, somebody that could speak English that could talk to you?

Tom Holland: Just the POW's.

Did you have at any time anything you were able to send to the International Red Cross so your family could find out?

Tom Holland: We stopped at one place was Wester, German, they saw what we had on. I had on electric shoeliners and big old fur boots. Well we went to this point and they looked at us and if we needed clothes, they gave me some shoes. They took these, they ripped all the wiring out of my electric suit, and they gave me some shoes, got rid of those old fur-lined boots. From there, they shipped us to an interrogation center at Frankfurt. We were there, and boxed us up in a little room. The next day the interrogation officer called us. We went out and he talked to us, offered us cigarettes, and he talked English.

What type of things did he ask you?

Tom Holland: Well, one thing he asked me is captain so and so still at the armament, the position there at the base? And, hell, I didn't know who he was talking about.

So they knew names.

Tom Holland: I told him I didn't know. The officer knew I didn't know nothing. What impressed me, I was in the 447th bomb group, and on the shelf up there he had a big notebook, 447th bomb group, so he knew more than I did about the group. But I didn't know doodly, been there such a short time.

Was it a harsh interrogation or was it pretty matter of fact?

Tom Holland: He was pretty laid back, offered you a cigarette. I said no, I don't smoke. He didn't understand that. I think he was over there puffing away. I'm just trying to think. We were there a few days, and we didn't talk to anybody. One day they called us out, of course they took all of our possessions, watch, rings, even took the dog tags. I didn't want to give up the dog tag. After we got through that solitary, they called us out and they had all this stuff, reclaim your stuff, and it was all there. I had a watch and dog tags. I didn't want to give them my dog tags, but my dad and sister had sent me a gold bracelet with my name on it and my serial number, and they looked and said well, you can keep that. OK, after that, we hadn't talked to anybody in several days, and they turned us out then into kind of a community deal. The bombardier was there.

Prison camp.

Tom Holland: These other crews that they had shot down were there, and hell, everybody was talkative. You hadn't talked to anybody in several days. And over there was another crew shot down the same day. All of them survived, and I knew them. We trained with them, but I don't know their names.

How long was it before you found out that the rest of your crew didn't make it?

Tom Holland: Right away.

Right away you knew?

Tom Holland: I asked the bombardier and of course I didn't see any of them, and this missing air crew report, I think they interviewed this bombardier after he was liberated, and he gave a rundown on each crew member. After we left the interrogation center, we were sent on either a two- or three-day train ride in Poland to a permanent camp, and that was Stalag Luft 4. On the

way, we were parked in a rail yard one night, and it was under I don't know what city it was, it might've been Berlin, because the English, about the only thing they bombed at night I think was Berlin, and we could see planes up there with spotlights on 'em, and they were shooting all around. After we got to a prison camp, it was they pretty well left us alone, except the walk for about a mile or two from the train station to the camp, this crazy German captain, pretty fanatic, and he damn near made us run. Some guy that came in later, they put the dogs on him and bayoneted him in the butt with a -

He was kind of the one that ran that camp, kind of the camp commandant I guess -

Tom Holland: Well, he was like a captain guard. His name was Walter Pickhart. I've got his picture.

So you've done a lot of research now to know who some of these folks are, because at the time I'm sure you couldn't have known really.

Tom Holland: Oh no, I didn't know then. Everything's on the Internet.

That's right, you can find a lot now.

Tom Holland: Then fast forward to being in the camp, it was, we got Red Cross parcels, to supplement the German food, or the German food supplemented the Red Cross parcel. We got a lot of vegetables from Germany – cabbage and carrots and kohlrabi and rutabagas and sugar beets, and all kind of stuff, that wasn't very good. We were there and about this time of year, we had been just assigned to that camp, and we were pretty well left alone in the camp. We had shakedown. They go through all your stuff, which you didn't have hardly anything.

What was a typical day like in the camp? What would you do to try to pass the time?

Tom Holland: I don't know what time we got ourselves to bed, but we'd fall out and have roll call at least twice a day. Roll call amounted to fall out, line up, and they would count and see if anybody had escaped. We'd have a little bit to eat for breakfast. Sometimes we'd have potato soup. But we had something to eat nearly all the time. It wasn't great, but it was something. That POW camp had double bunks. The mattress was like chicken nest straw, and we learned that one was on top and one on the bottom, well they butted up, and this other guy, we would pool our food, what we'd eat together, and conserve our food. We got along pretty good.

Where was he from?

Tom Holland: He was from Kinnet, Missouri, was raised in Zenith. After the war he moved to Kinnet and become a dentist, but lost him.

How did he become a POW?

Tom Holland: They were shot down but he didn't bail out. They crash landed, all his crew survived.

Would you say a good number of the fellow prisoners in your camp were from air crews that had been shot down?

Tom Holland: We were all.

They were all air crews.

Tom Holland: I didn't see how we could have anybody left because there was, I would just guess in this one compound, probably 2,000 or 3,000 POW's and they had at least four compounds. They were all Americans. Once in a while we'd get a Canadian, somebody coming in, and we assigned them.

Was it deliberately done to keep the air crews separate from other types of POW's, or you were the only POW's they were capturing?

Tom Holland: I think one thing that old Herman Goring was, he probably did some favors for the air crews. I mean we were all non-com's, and we didn't have to work. But anyway men, Troy Jone, that's my buddy, we pooled everything and we got along pretty good. Fast forward to July, August, September, October, November, December, January, and February the 2nd -

'45?

Tom Holland: '45, they moved us out of camp. The Russians were coming to Poland. I guess they didn't want to let the Russians have us because the Russians would have probably give us a gun and made us fight.

That's probably right.

Tom Holland: Anyway February the 2nd, '45, March, April the 16th, we would march, stay in barns at night, and if we had any food, we had to carry it with us. Before they moved us out, they gave us each a Red Cross parcel, full parcel. Most times we'd be given a parcel with two men to a parcel, or five men to a parcel. We'd have to divvy it up. Anyway, we stayed in barns except one night, it got dark and we kept going, kept going, and finally they announced that we were going to spend the night in this open field. Said if you get it started, you can have a fire. Hell, it was wet and snowy and icy, and anyway we got a little fire going, and the next day we got a parcel, Red Cross package. Next day they put us on a ferry and we had to go across, I think it was the port of Stetten or Stetteen, on a ferry and went across there. From then on, it was just day after day, you would march. Anyway, we stayed in that field all night and we survived it. Some of the guys exaggerated how it was. It was snowed in like a bunch of husky sled dogs snowed in, but it wasn't that bad.

But they were moving you pretty fast.

Tom Holland: Oh yeah, every day.

The Germans had a lot of fear, didn't they, of the Soviets executing them and that sort of thing if they were captured.

Tom Holland: One of my friends that come down here, his mother was in Berlin I think during the bombing. He was damned service man, and he said you couldn't find anybody in Germany that fought against Americans. They all fought against the Russians.

How long do you think it was that they marched you all?

Tom Holland: Oh, we marched until, we went to another camp south of Hamburg, they put us in this camp and we were there April the 16th and the British came in, right into camp.

To go back a little bit, sir, when did your family find out that you were a POW, and how did they find out?

Tom Holland: They were notified. I've got telegrams and stuff.

The U.S. military sent them a telegram?

Tom Holland: Yeah. I've still got the telegrams. We went through a bunch of stuff one day and put it under plastic into a book.

When was it that you found out from them that they knew you were all right?

Tom Holland: I never did know.

You never did know? So they weren't able to send you -

Tom Holland: I never did get any mail. They sent mail and they sent packages, but I never did get 'em.

So who knows where it went.

Tom Holland: And they could get cigarettes were like money, and they would send a tobacco package, and there would be so many cigarettes, but I never did get any of those either.

High likelihood that somewhere along the way somebody just stole them I would guess.

Tom Holland: Well, there was transportation problems in Germany. Red Cross was, they had their own equipment.

I'm a little bit surprised to hear that you all got as much from the Red Cross as you did because I've talked to other veterans that were held as POW's, and they've had stories saying the Germans wouldn't give us our Red Cross parcels because they would say they had been destroyed, or what was going on as the Germans were keeping it for themselves.

Tom Holland: Different camps. I know they had a backlog storage of Red Cross parcels because the day we moved out of this camp, they drove us out, and stuff we didn't have like overcoats, give you an overcoat. There was one package to each man. They were awkward to carry, and some of the guys wanted to smoke so bad they had to go rip 'em open and they would have these can of Spam and all this canned stuff, and hell they couldn't handle it, so they would throw it away. The Germans back there were picking it up. Some guys have different stories. Like there's a guy in Austin that wrote a book, Harvey Gann, and he's supposed to have escaped five times. He was a damned idiot trying that. He had no place to go. Anyway I think he had a lot of fiction in that book.

That was never a thought that crossed your mind when you were being held.

Tom Holland: No place to go.

Sure, you don't speak the language. Did you ever during that time you were held, you were held for six months, sir?

Tom Holland: 10 months. June, July, August, September, October, November, and April.

During that 10 months, did you have any news from the outside world or any idea of what was going on in the outside?

Tom Holland: You would talk to new guys that came in. I don't remember any right offhand.

I would think though when the Germans started moving you because Soviets were coming, you all probably had an idea then that the Germans were losing, is that right?

Tom Holland: Oh, we knew that we were going to win the war, even when we got shot down.

So did you ever have any doubt that you were going to be freed at some point?

Tom Holland: Oh, in fact some of the Germans that handled us day by day and counted us, I asked this one guy, I said, he's got a girlfriend, where's your girlfriend? She's in Chicago. OK, before we got to this camp where we were liberated, they put us on a train, kind of late one day, and they shut the door. We stayed on that siding all night long. The next morning they opened the door and let us out to take a leak. This one guy said my buddy has been cramping all night. He's got diarrhea. He said let's let him out first. No problem. As he was getting out, he stumbled and he crapped all over himself. Of course this was in the spring time and the weather was warmer and we had extra clothes. I don't think I gave him anything. Other guys gave him some clothes so he wouldn't smell so bad. But they put us in that boxcar and we were just standing up shoulder to shoulder.

No room to sit down.

Tom Holland: And kind of slumps down to go to sleep. It's a wonder some of us didn't smother. I woke up and couldn't feel my feet and legs. There were a pile of legs on top of me. I got back on top, dozed off and was back on the bottom. This camp we were in, they were gonna march us out again, and announced the guys that think they can't make it because you're sick, go over here and there's a doctor that will look at you and tell you if you can go or not. I had some half-cooked soybeans and I had gas and swelled up, and I hadn't been feeling good and I went over there and had a little temperature and he said well, you can stay. My buddy was there and said well hell, I'm gonna go over and see if they let me stay. He went over there and said them bastards wouldn't let me stay. They said I could go. We had just got at random a package sent home from somebody that's handed about, had some cigars, and I had two or three cigars in my pocket. My buddy says I'm not sick, but I'm gonna be. He said you got any of them cigars? I said yeah, here's one, and I looked out there and he was chewin' it up. I looked after a while and he was gone. We were in a tent temporarily, and somebody come in and said Holland, says your buddy is over at the doctor's place and he really needs to see you. I went over and said you sick? He says no, but as soon as they see me I'm gonna puke all over this place. After a while they come in and said they let me stay, but says they sure did get mad at me. That's just one of the funniest.

In your camp, I guess it was organized by whoever the senior man was, they pretty much set it up amongst the POW's that you had your own rank structure?

Tom Holland: Yeah, they had a camp leader. He was a rankin' NCO, and they had a kitchen, wasn't a mess hall, it was just a kitchen, and we would go down with a bucket and get whatever they're going to give us. This camp leader was a logger leader I guess you'd call him, his name was Chapman. He would get some news somehow and he'd come around to these different barracks and read us the news. I don't know if they had a radio or got it from the Germans or what. Then all the cooking staff was GI's. I think they lived at their quarters near the kitchen down there. They would take Red Cross parcels like corned beef, and they wouldn't give it to us. They'd send it to mess hall, but they would cook a pot full of potatoes and put this corned beef in there and it was pretty good.

What would you do when you weren't lining up to be counted? Did you have anything to read or could you play games?

Tom Holland: Oh yeah, we played cards. We didn't have any cards until Christmas. Take a piece of cardboard and made a deck of cards and we played poker for cigarettes. We could read and had books. Oh they had a theater there, some of the guys. I never did go. It was always crowded, full. One day I was out walking across the compound just for exercise, an overcast day and I heard some airplanes up above, overcast, what the hell? You could hear different sounds, just cruising. After a while, I think it was four FW190's broke through the overcast. The one in the lead came down and he'd get lower and lower and he rolled over and on his back, down about the trees, and I said boy, that's a hot pilot. After a while, kaboom. He crashed. I don't know if he got shot down or whether he had bailed out when that airplane was, didn't get anybody in it. I witnessed that. One guy on the Internet wrote me and he said I don't know if I was dreaming or not, but said I saw this German airplane crash. I said no, you weren't dreaming because you can get a lot off the Internet. I haven't got anything in a long time.

Tell us a little bit sir, I was surprised that you knew the name of the German soldier that captured you originally. Tell us how you found out about him.

Tom Holland: That's a big, different story.

Well go ahead if you've got time.

Tom Holland: The Internet deal. A guy in Germany, Berlin, named Ulrich Koch, saw my posting, and he was doing research on the day of the shoot-down of our airplane. He just sent me a message saying I stumbled on your posting on this, and he was in touch, well he had information on the shoot-down. I didn't get pictures, and he was in touch with this guy that brought me in, and he give me his name and I got his picture. His name is Arnold Tishman.

When you saw his photo did you recognize him?

Tom Holland: Oh no. I don't know if he shot at me or shot a warning shot, but he wrote Ulrich Koch, we got a lot of emails back and forth. He was writing a book. He described himself as a freelance historian and freelance filmmaker, and I lost contact with him. I can't get in touch with him anymore. But he was writing this book and part of it was devoted to our crew being shot down. And I talked to him about the book and back and forth with emails, and in the meantime he had a fire in his apartment and had to recover from that. But anyway, that's how I got the

information. And then he sent a picture out of all the, this landscape out there, it looked like his picture was taken, a guy up in a tree, a curl of smoke out there. So I didn't think anything about it. I got to looking at that. I wrote back and asked him if that was a picture of our airplane burning, and he said yes, and he gave me the guy's name who was a choir director at a church that took the picture. I don't tell that story to everybody because it's so damn unbelievable. But I never did hear anymore about his book. I asked him about the book and he said well, be patient. I wanted to get it.

He's in Germany?

Tom Holland: Yeah, he's in Berlin. And I told my daughter, my daughter was a German teacher in high school. I wrote him in English and he wrote me back in English, and I asked my daughter if she would send him an email in German telling him to contact me. I think his staff probably looked at that email coming in, and we're not gonna bother him with that.

It's amazing though that you have that information from him about he captured you and some of those details.

Tom Holland: I'll show you some stuff after a while if you're interested.

Yes sir. Well, let's go back then, sir, real quick you said April 16th, '45, when you were liberated. Tell us about that day.

Tom Holland: The English came in on that day. There was an old Englishman in the barracks with us, oh, the Yank's will be here tomorrow.

How did he know that?

Tom Holland: Well, he said I heard a tank come down the road last night, and said it came down and then it turned around and went back, said Yank's will be here, Yank's will be here, well the Yank's never did come. I was going to bring in some of that stuff and show you but it's in my pick-up.

Oh yes sir, well when we're done if you want to, you can show me the stuff you have.

Tom Holland: We heard after the old Englishman told us the Yank's will be here, and we heard the next day that there was another camp up the road, and said they're in that camp now. We waited around, waited around, after a while here come some kind of armored vehicle at the front gate. Of course, the Germans, they were already gone.

When had the Germans left?

Tom Holland: A day or two before this. We looked and nobody in the guard tower -

They didn't say anything to you, they just disappeared?

Tom Holland: Yeah, and anyway this guy drove in the gate. Of course the gate was open and we could come and go. At that time they would let us get out to go to the village or whatever to get water. This guy drove up in this armored vehicle and right away he got mobbed, everybody talking to him asking him questions, getting his autograph. I got his autograph, I got stuff he

wrote down. After that, it might've been a day or two later, they started shipping guys out. They said well, we're taking so many British, so many Americans, and as priorities, how long you'd been there, and one day they announced well, we're taking 10 more Americans tomorrow. Everybody rushed out to get signed up, and my buddy went out, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 10, and Tom was 11. So they didn't take him. So he turned and said Tex, said we've been together a long time, been through a lot, but said tomorrow might never come. I said I'm gonna go ahead and go. I said well hell, I don't blame you. So he went on and a day or two later, they made up another list and shipped us out and we went to some kind of tent city and spent the night, and the next day we went to this air base, and they had a big tent there and we didn't have anything to eat, but we were there, and the airplanes, P-47's were coming in, C-47's, bringing supplies, and they were loading up the guys and taking them out. So it was getting kind of late in the day and finally they came in and we got loaded up. Said well, we're going to France. There was a collection point in France, was Camp Lucky Strike. Well, we thought that was where we were going. We flew, it got dark, got night, and said well, we're not going to France, we're gonna go to England. So they flew us to England and landed at this air base, and there were a bunch of limey men, women, boys, girls, and they would take each guy and kind of entertain. They give us tea and something to eat. This was 12 o'clock at night I guess. All we wanted to do was be left alone. And I talked to this one guy wanted to know where you were from and all that, and I told him I was from Texas. Oh, I learned to fly in Texas. He was in Terrell, Texas. Later on that night, they put us in trucks, and I guess it was a truck, and took us to a hospital and I think it was Oxford, I'm not sure. Went into this hospital and half a dozen guys with this one ward boy and first thing said stop right here, put a blanket and said put all your clothes in it. It was right by the shower. He had this can of ____ flea powder, dusted ourselves.

De-louse you, I guess.

Tom Holland: Yeah, and we had just been de-loused with DDT. They squirt it down there. The place was foggy with DDT. Anyway the guys would get in that shower and stay and stay in, and the guy said, well, there's a tub up there, and I said OK, I'll take a tub. I ran that sucker full of water and it was so hot I couldn't get in. I don't know why but the cold water was running as hot as the hot water. We stayed there and they fed us up, and were there about 8-10 days I guess.

What was it like when you finally got back home?

Tom Holland: Well, back up a little bit, they shipped us from the hospital to London and they just quartered us in flats. We were free to come and go, and just check the bulletin board. This was in kind of a residential part of London. Just check the bulletin board every now and then and see about a shipping list. We were in Chelsea. Dave said he was, you were in Chelsea, weren't you?

Dave: Well I was in London a while ago.

Tom Holland: Well, we mentioned Knight's Bridge Station.

Dave: Yeah, yeah, I did.

Tom Holland: Part of London that we were in. We just rode around, go to the show, go to the pubs.

I bet that had to feel kind of different after being held for 10 months as a prisoner and now you're roaming around London.

Tom Holland: We adapted pretty fast. They had a mess hall. I don't remember eating at the mess hall much, but we found a little old restaurant there that served a little piece of meat and some potatoes and we'd go there and eat for about a few shillings. Then one day they came up with an announcement and said you guys are going out, and they put us in one of them landing crafts and boated us out to a ship, LST. We came home in a convoy of about 6 LST's. Wasn't many POW's on there, maybe 10 or 20.

How long did it take you to get back on the ship?

Tom Holland: About 2 weeks, 14 days I think. It putted along. It didn't go very fast.

Do you remember finally getting to come back home to Texas and see your family?

Tom Holland: We landed in Virginia, Hughes I think. I got on a train and it took us a couple of days to get back to San Antonio. I think we were in San Antonio about a day or so and they gave us leave. I called my folks. I got on a bus and came back to Luling is where my folks were living then, my dad and my sister. Of course we got there and my bag didn't get there with me. It got in in the wee hours of the morning about just around 2 o'clock. I called this number. It was a neighbor. My dad didn't have a phone. The neighbor had a phone and I called and woke them up and they told my dad, and he came out to the bus station. All I wanted to do was get in the sack and go to sleep. My aunt lived up the street. My dad go up, and oh, oh, oh what the hell you doin'? He said oh, they said when you got in they wanted to know, and it didn't matter what time. Hell, it must've been 2 o'clock in the morning. Anyway, we survived that.

When were you discharged from the Air Corps, shortly thereafter?

Tom Holland: The POW's, they gave us a 90-day leave, delay enroute. But that was a long time. I hadn't been home in a while. My dad was working in Austin for this construction company that he worked for, and I said hell, I'll just go to work. I went up there and worked a couple of days and a local guy called me and said he's gonna, he's got the Dodge dealership and he wants our men to be his parts person. I said well hell, I just bought a house and used all my back pay to buy a house.

Here in Lockhart?

Tom Holland: Yeah, and anyway, he found out about me. He was a World War I guy, and I said well I don't know, I have to consider it. I hung up. And after a few minutes, if you want to work for me I'll pay you \$125 a month. So I'd been farm and construction all my young days, and I liked that pretty good, traveling around the state. So I took him up on it. I worked for him 13 years I guess.

In Austin?

Tom Holland: Lockhart. Back in those days, Austin was a place I could see the capitol and I could see the University of Texas tower and I could go anywhere in town. Give me an address. No more. Can't do that.

Yes sir. Tell us now sir, because we're here at the airport, I guess you've stayed involved though in aviation all these years.

Tom Holland: Well, the guy that ran the airport when they first opened the airport was a friend of my wife, went to school with. Of course he was married and they had one kid, and he was the instructor. He started teaching GI's, you know, we'd make an application and get approved and take lessons, and PA would pay 'em for our training. That's how I learned to fly.

And you learned to fly right here at this airport. That's great.

Tom Holland: Barely out to the highway, and before they built the runways, it was all grass. He started operating before they really built the airport. He had a little shack up in the corner there and parked his airplane.

Grass runway you said?

Tom Holland: Oh yeah. Yeah, this was all grass until just in the 80s. I don't know when they paved this. Anyway, I started back to flying in '84. I decided I better not quit again.

That's great. Well sir, I appreciate it. That's an amazing story you have, and recalled all the details.

Tom Holland: I probably got some other things if you just remind me.

Well, I wanted to get the basics because I knew Mr. Fulton had mentioned that you'd been in World War II, you'd been a POW, and just in my mind I think people listening to this interview, they'll get a good mental picture of where you were and what all you did. It adds to that.

Tom Holland: Our crew didn't last until water got hot over in combat though, four missions. Some of the guys, I think the copilot, that was his first mission. They assigned us to different pilots and the first pilot was an instructor pilot and the air pilot was a copilot that day, and the radio operator was operating in a different crew.

Oh, I didn't realize that. I thought in your case you had the same crew that you trained with.

Tom Holland: That was kind of an orientation into combat. The day we got shot down, that was the first day that we had all flown together as a crew. I think the copilot, I think that was his first mission. It's a bunch of stories about, one email I can't find, describes these two guys that were supposed to have delayed their jump, they weren't found until some days later. The guy that found them hooked them up behind his tractor and drug 'em to town. I can't find that email. I need to find it. I changed computers and one of them I'm not using, before I went off and canceled out the server I transferred everything to my other computer. I don't know if I got everything on there or not.

Well sir, again, I really appreciate your time. But most of all, appreciate your service to our nation.

Tom Holland: Look what it got us into.

Well on behalf of Commissioner Patterson and everyone at the Land Office, we want to thank you for your service.

Tom Holland: One mistake I made, I bought an old farm out here and ____ to the Veterans Land Board.

What year was that that you bought it?

Tom Holland: It was about 1950-51.

So pretty on in the Veterans Land Board because they started that after World War II.

Tom Holland: I bought about 100 acres for \$5,000. I got into raising a family and buying a place of business, and opening my own business, and it was hard to make ends meet so I sold the place for about what I paid for it. I've regretted it ever since.

Sure, real estate's gone up a lot since then.

Tom Holland: We'd go by the old place, but kids come down, two kids in Austin, and we drove out past the old place. I don't know who owns it. I'd like to find out and get permission to walk over it.

I bet the county has records you could find of who has that land.

Tom Holland: Oh yeah, or some of the neighbors probably would, too.

Yeah, I bet they'd let you do that. Well sir, again I want to thank you for letting me come out, and in about a week or two I'm gonna send you copies of this interview on CDs so you can give them to your family or friends or whomever, and we can get you more free copies as well. We'll also send you a commemorative binder. It's going to have a letter and certificate in there from Commissioner Patterson. And finally, you mentioned photographs, if you have any photographs or things that you want to share with us, we can get copies or you can email them to us and we can put them on the Internet so that other people can see them and hear your interview.

Tom Holland: I can show you. I might have some stuff I can give you.

Well I'll be glad to come, I don't want to keep anything that is yours.

Tom Holland: Well, I mean this is stuff I've copied off the Internet, a picture of the crew.

Yes sir, we'd love to get pictures.

Tom Holland: In fact I visited these B-17s that fly around the country and sometime I'll make up a folder and just give it to 'em. Sometimes they're interested in it, sometimes they're not.

Have you had a chance to fly in one?

Tom Holland: Oh yeah, a few years ago I went to Georgetown, and rode the aluminum overcast one that belongs to the CAF.

Commemorative Air Force? Yeah.

Tom Holland: They didn't give it to me. I had to pay 'em. \$400 for it. It was a funny feeling though to take off and the last time you took off in it, I felt like them guys were around me.

Kind of déjà vu I guess.

Dave: You're supposed to have equal take-offs and landings, and you didn't. Well you did land, but not carefully.

Tom Holland: I got more take-off's than I got landings.

Well that's great. Well sir, I'll turn the recorder off and follow you over and look at pictures. So again, thank you.

[End of recording]